

*EFFECTS OF A REVIEWER-PROMPTING
STRATEGY ON TIMELY MANUSCRIPT REVIEWS*

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We studied a reviewer-prompting system designed to improve the timeliness of journal reviews. The prompting system consisted of an e-mail message sent individually to reviewers noting the manuscript number, review due date, and associated social amenities for the timely completion of the task. Our results indicated that the prompting system increased timely reviews.

DESCRIPTORS: applied behavior analysis, associate editors, journal editing, journal reviews, peer review, prompting

Authors and editors often express concern about the amount of time required to render an editorial decision during the peer review process (Caellegh, 1993). One means of expediting the review process involves the timely return of manuscript reviews to editors (Epstein, 1995). An approach used to promote timely behavior, in general, has been to send people reminders. For example, a reminder sent prior to a scheduled meeting has been shown to increase the percentage of appointments kept by patients seeking medical care (MacDonald, Brown, & Ellis, 2000).

Journal editors have also used prompts to facilitate the timely return of reviews with anecdotal reports of success (D. Wacker, personal communication, May, 1998). However, no research has been conducted on whether a systematic prompting system improves the timeliness of jurors returning their reviews. Our goal in this study was to assess empirically whether an e-mail prompting system would increase the percentage of timely return of reviews to a journal editor.

METHOD

Participants

Reviewers for the *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis (JABA)* served as participants. The second author, who served as a *JABA* associate editor during the study, selected all reviewers. For each manuscript assigned to the associate editor, 4 to 5 reviewers were selected, with 2 individuals typically being editorial board members, 2 individuals typically being postdoctoral guest reviewers, and 1 person being a graduate student guest re-

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viewer. A total of 73 manuscripts and 308 reviews were included in the analysis.

Measurement

Review timeliness was measured as the number of days reviews were returned relative to the editorial due date. Therefore, a positive number denotes an early return, and a negative number denotes a late return. On the day when a review was initially received at the associate editor's office (by postal mail, e-mail, or fax), an editorial assistant recorded the receipt date, reviewer name, and manuscript number on the master routing sheet. The four or five reviews for each manuscript constituted the data used in the analysis.

Procedure

Baseline. Upon receipt of a manuscript from the *JABA* editorial offices, each reviewer was sent a packet that contained a memorandum requesting that the individual serve as a reviewer, the manuscript, a comment form, reviewer guidelines, confidentiality assurance sheet, return envelope, routing sheet, and, if applicable, a guest reviewer acknowledgment form. All review packets indicated in the memorandum, comment form, and editorial routing sheet a specific date for the review to be returned to the associate editor's office (i.e., 4 weeks after the date the manuscript had been mailed to the reviewer). During baseline no prompt was sent to the reviewer.

Prompting system. All conditions were the same as baseline, except that a prompting system was used. The intervention consisted of an e-mail message sent to individual reviewers 7 days prior to the review due date. A sample message read:

A reminder that your review of *JABA* manuscript #00-00 is due on September 22, 2002. We look forward to receiving your review.

Please fax or e-mail one copy of your

review to my office, if possible, and return the other copies via postal mail. If your review is already in the mail, please disregard this reminder.

Thank you for your help with the *JABA* review process.

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Experimental Design

The intervention was analyzed using an ABAB withdrawal design. The initial baseline period lasted from September 1999 through April 2000. The intervention was in place from May 2000 through September 2000. The second baseline period lasted from October 2000 through September 2001. The second intervention lasted from October 2001 through September 2002.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Figure 1 shows the timeliness of reviews returned by reviewers. The data are arrayed as the mean days (plus or minus) reviews were returned to the associate editor's offices during the experiment. Small to moderate increases in on-time reviews were observed during the prompting phases. Along with increased timeliness for individual manuscripts, the prompting system also reduced the between-manuscript variability in return times. That is, prompting resulted in reduced variability in reviewer lateness. Finally, no differences were observed across types of reviewers. Based on these results, we recommend to current and future journal editors that they use a similar prompting system to improve the efficiency of at least one aspect of the peer review process.

To assess the degree to which a range of reviewers was used in each condition, we divided the number of different reviewers by

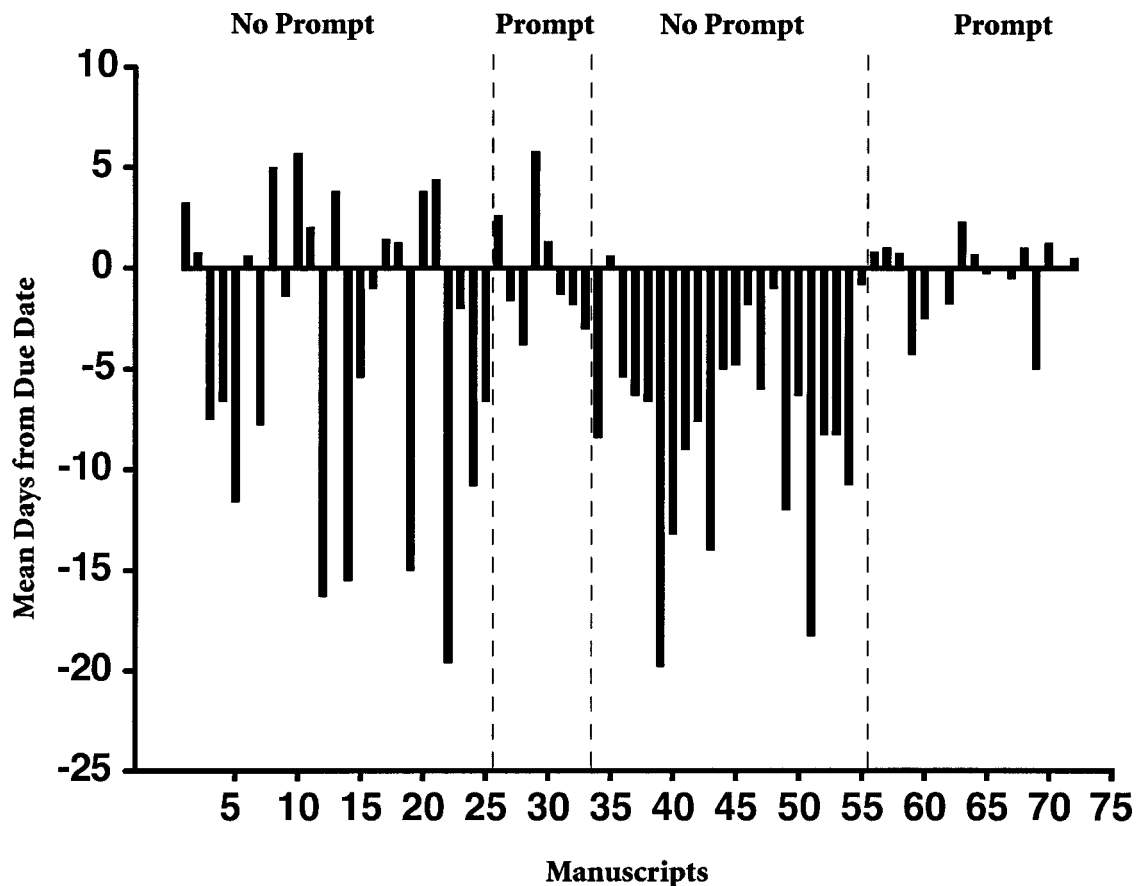


Figure 1. Effects of the reviewer-prompting strategy on the timeliness of journal reviews. The *y* axis notes the mean number of days reviews were returned relative to the editorial due date. Positive numbers reflect early returns, and negative numbers reflect late returns.

the number of manuscripts reviewed in each phase of the study. A 1 indicates that the same reviewers were used for each manuscript, and scores of 4 to 5 indicate that reviewers were used only once within a phase. During the baseline, prompting, baseline, and prompting phases, the different-reviewer-to-manuscript ratio was 3.8, 3.7, 3.3, and 3.7, respectively. These data suggest that our results were not due to an overreliance on certain reviewers during the intervention phases.

One limitation of the current study was the definition used for an "on-time" review. We operationalized this construct as receiving the review at the editorial office by the

due date listed on the master routing sheet. However, in the case of reviews transmitted via postal mail, reviewers might consider the day of initial mailing as constituting an on-time review. Another interpretive issue with our study is one of replication. *JABA* is noted for the delivery of timely editorial decisions, and replication of these effects with other journals would help to establish the generality of our findings.

Overall, our data suggest a simple way in which journal editors can positively influence reviewers' comments being returned on time. Such an effect may also positively influence the overall efficiency of the peer review process.

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